NEW COMMANDMENT
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Psalm 126
Selections from John 13, 14, 17

"I give you a new commandment, that you love one another.
Just as I have loved you, you also should love one another.
By this everyone will know that you are my disciples,
if you have love for one another."
John 13: 34–35 (NRSV)

Who would have thought that you would take
this uncredentialed
Galilean rabbi
to become the pivot of newness in the world?
Who would have thought that you—
God of gods and Lord of lords—
would fasten on such small, innocuous agents
whom the world scorns
to turn creation toward your newness? . . .
We ask for freedom and courage to move out from our
nicely arranged patterns of security
into dangerous places of newness where we fear to go.
Cross us by the cross, that we may be Easter marked.

Walter Brueggemann
Awed to Heaven, Rooted in Earth

What wondrous love is this that goes to the cross for us?
As we move through this Lent, on our way to Good Friday,
open our hearts and minds to a love so profound it will suffer and die for us.
Startle us again with this goodness, this terrible beauty, this truth. Amen.

At the center of Garrison Keillor's ongoing story of life in the fictional town of Lake Wobegon, Minnesota, are three interesting institutions: The Side Track Tap, the tavern where the locals gather to swap gossip and talk about

life; the Chatterbox Café; and the Lutheran church. Churches—the Lutheran church in particular—show up in a lot of Keillor's monologues. In fact, he has recently published a collection of them: *Life among the Lutherans.* In one monologue, Keillor explains that the Lutheran minister, Pastor David Ingquist, is a direct descendant of the first Lutheran pastor to come to Lake Wobegon, Leif Ingquist, and his wife, Anna. They came from Norway long ago because of a terrible church fight. The issue was the question of "whether we will recognize each other in heaven, or will our spiritual forms not have our earthly features." They fought it out for years. Some argued, "Yes, of course, we'll know Grandma there, and she will know us." Others argued, "No, we will go to a finer and better life, and if you think your face is anything God would allow in a place of perfect bliss, then you ought to take another look."

People got all hot about it and the fight became so fierce that people would gladly have avoided heaven if it meant they'd have to talk to other Lutherans, and the Lutheran church split into the Facial and Non-Facial factions. The Ingquists got sick of it and packed up, left for America, and started a new Lutheran church in Minnesota (*Life among the Lutherans,* pp.36–37).

I like that story because Presbyterians are even worse. We fight more frequently and more rigorously than anybody. And more than any other denomination we resolve differences by walking away from one another and forming a new denomination. There are seven major Presbyterian denominations in the United States and many smaller ones, each one formed when a group of people became angry over a difference in beliefs, theology, or practice and walked away and formed their own denomination. Our denomination—the largest one of them by far—split at the time of the Civil War into a Southern and Northern branch, and it took more than a century to get back together. And when we did reunite, several hundred congregations didn't want any part of it, primarily because the reunited church would have women ministers and elders and deacons, and so those congregations pulled out and founded a new denomination, the very conservative Presbyterian Church in America (or PCA), and we barely speak to one another.

There is nothing so bitter as a church fight, nothing so tragic as a family feud, no military conflict fought with quite as much hatred and determined

ferocity as a civil war, which we have experienced in our own nation's history.

Closeness breeds conflict it seems; familiarity, it is said, breeds contempt; and so there is no place where Christianity collides as dramatically with the reality of the human condition as when we start talking about love—for neighbor, love for enemies, and perhaps the final and most difficult challenge of all, love for one another.

The idea of love is central to Christianity, particularly in the Gospel of John, the Fourth Gospel. John is very different from Matthew, Mark, and Luke, the Synoptic Gospels. For one thing, John is written much later, probably around the end of the first century, seventy years after the life and death and resurrection of Jesus. A lot has happened in the intervening years. The Jewish population of Palestine finally rose up and revolted against Rome. There was an all-out war. The Jewish forces held out for a long time, but Rome won; the last holdouts—at the mountain fortress of Masada—committed suicide rather than surrender.

The Romans, weary of the constant agitation by their Jewish subjects, leveled Jerusalem and the temple and drove out most of the population. The Jews were dispersed. It is called the Diaspora. Jews would not have a homeland again—would live as exiles in other peoples' lands, often unwelcome, ghettoized, discriminated against, persecuted, finally euthanized—until 1947, when they would return to the land and the city.

Now, at the end of the first century, seventy years after Jesus, thirty years after the war, the Jesus movement has grown rapidly and slowly disengaged from Judaism. Followers of Jesus, "Followers of the Way" they are called, are calling themselves Christians.

In fact, by the time the Fourth Gospel is written, there is some hostility between Jews and Christians, which accounts for John's harsh description of chief priests and religious officials, scribes and Pharisees, and his constantly pejorative use of "the Jews," even though he, himself, is a Jew and so is almost everyone else in the story.

But the big difference between John and Matthew, Mark, and Luke is that John is a philosopher. Matthew and Luke start their Gospels with a story of a birth, a manger in Bethlehem, angels, shepherds, and wise men. Mark

begins with the account of Jesus' baptism, as an adult. John, the Fourth Gospel, begins with a concept, an idea to ponder: "In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God and the Word was God."

And then John makes a staggering philosophic assertion: "The Word became flesh."

The Word that was with God and was God has become flesh and dwelt among us. God, the mysterious essence of all that is, the One—"the primal unity," Plato called it—is not confined to some corner of the universe or a corner of the human mind but has appeared in human history, in the life of a Palestinian Jew, Jesus of Nazareth, whom his followers now call the Christ, the Messiah, the Son of God, the Word made flesh.

The second idea that is unique to John is that the best, most accurate word to describe God, the God Jesus revealed, is love. That's new. God has always been described by words like *power, majesty, omnipotence, righteousness*; God has always been described as creating, judging, punishing. John's absolutely unique idea is that God is love. As John's story of Jesus moves toward its conclusion, love emerges as the central point: the love God is, the love Jesus incarnates and expresses even unto death, the love that his followers are called to live out, in his name, in the world. Jesus hopes to live on in the world in the love of his followers.

After three years of teaching and healing in and around the villages and synagogues in Galilee, in the north, they are in Jerusalem now. Ever since the authorities heard that Jesus raised a dead man back to life and that many people were following Jesus, he has been a wanted man. The authorities in Jerusalem have decided to get rid of him before he further irritates the occupying Romans and causes them to retaliate against the whole nation. It is the night before Passover. No one doubts how this thing is going to end. The only question is when and how. He is going to die. It is literally, and those gathered know it, a last supper.

They are all there: the people who have come to Jerusalem with him—Peter, James, John, Andrew—and the others—probably Mary and Martha and Lazarus, maybe Mary Magdalene and Mary his mother. The atmosphere must have been thick with tension and foreboding. No one spoke as they passed the bowl of oil in which to dip their bread and the common cup of wine. And then Jesus stands up, takes off his garment, takes the basin of

water and towel that were always there for dinner guests to use, and does the most astonishing thing: kneels in front of each one of them, washes the feet of each, and dries them with the towel. A slave usually does it. It is common hospitality, courtesy extended always. And if there is no slave, the basin and towel are there for guests to use themselves. It is the most extraordinary thing they have ever experienced. They are speechless. Jesus —their teacher, the one they have come to regard as Lord, slowly coming to understand that God is in him—kneeling, washing feet. They are speechless, until he comes to Peter and Peter resists—"You shouldn't be doing this for me, Jesus"—saying what they all were thinking. "Yes, Peter, this is who I am; this is what I have come for. And now, from now on, you must love one another as I have loved you, and you must never forget what I have done this night."

There is no Eucharist (communion) in John: no broken bread and "this is my body"; no cup and "this is my blood." Instead, in the Fourth Gospel, there is the act of washing feet and the imperative to love.

Some churches practice foot washing liturgically. The Pope will wash feet on Maundy Thursday and so will Cardinal George. Some scholars discourage the symbolic, ritual practice because it distracts from Jesus' act, which was not unique in itself; someone did it at every meal. What is unique is that *he* did it for men and women with whom he had shared a three-year journey and to whom he was now committing the entire future of what he started.

Frances Taylor Gench, whose book *Encounters with Jesus* we have been following, in her reflection on this incident says she was invited to a foot washing once, fretted about it, and finally decided not to go. She writes, "For one thing I couldn't figure out the logistics and what to do with my pantyhose, but to be honest, my deeper discomfort was that it was an act of extraordinary intimacy." Gench remembers a group of women planning a conference, discussing whether or not to include foot washing, until the chairperson said, "If I announce that we are planning a foot washing for the next meeting, half the women won't show up that night, and the other half will spend the afternoon getting a pedicure" (p. 102).

Gench gets to the heart of the matter by observing that there are two moral imperatives here, two things Jesus wants his followers to do, and the first is to receive, to stop objecting and resisting—"I'm not worthy of this"—stop

qualifying (“I should be washing your feet, Lord”). Just be silent and quiet and receive the love that is being given.

The second imperative is to love one another just like that, to show the world the truth of the Christian gospel by the depth and power of Christian love.

We have trouble with both of these, Gench says, maybe more difficulty with the first—the receiving part—than the second, the giving part. We are uncomfortable receiving a gift unless we have a way to reciprocate. It’s much easier for many of us to give hospitality than to receive it. And it’s not just social discomfort. We have difficulty with the very idea of undeserved, unconditional love. It was the great theologian Karl Barth who said that in our heart of hearts we don’t like grace, don’t like to be told that we not only don’t deserve the gift, but that there is absolutely nothing we can do to earn it. We’re much more comfortable doing something good to deserve God’s grace.

The history of religion is the story of human attempts to attach conditions to God’s love—rules, regulations, rituals, traditions that will make us feel like we do deserve God’s goodwill. Surely you have to do something to receive God’s love. And the word here is, stop it, be silent, quit objecting, and ponder the amazing proposition that you are loved eternally by the one who created you, the one who died to show you that love.

Jesus returns to the subject several times in the lengthy conversation he has with his followers that night, and he puts it in an ethical imperative, gives them one last commandment, “that you love another, as I have loved you.”

There is no other ethical imperative in the Fourth Gospel: no “turn the other cheek,” no “walk a second mile,” no “give your cloak away.” Just this: love one another as I have loved you.

He did not say, “Like one another,” and for that we may be grateful. There is a lot of adult truth to the story about a Sunday school teacher who asked her class of six-year-olds if they wanted to go to heaven. A little girl responded, “Not if all these other people will be there.” Gench says, “I take comfort in the fact that Jesus promised that there are many rooms in his Father’s house and must confess that I sometimes pray, ‘Please, please,

please, Jesus, as you prepare the rooms and make the reservations, don't assign me to a room with . . . " (p. 108).

It may be the most difficult thing he ever asked us to do. How are we to do it? Can you will yourself to feel love for someone you don't like? It was a moment of revelation for me when it finally dawned on me that Christian love is not a feeling at all. It is an act, a way of behaving. Henri Nouwen wrote, "If we wait for a feeling of love before loving, we may never learn to love well. Mostly we know the loving thing to do. When we 'do' love, even if others are not able to respond with love, we will discover that our feelings catch up with our acts" (*Bread for the Journey*). And a wise Episcopal priest, Reuel Howe, said, "If your love depends on the loveliness, the utility, the deserving of the other, you'll never be much of a lover." "When people ask me how to find love," Howe said, "[I tell them] you will find love not by looking for it, but by giving it away. . . . If someone asks me where to find God, I tell them to go find someone to love" (*Herein Is Love*).

How are we to obey this command? There is only one way, and it begins not in your will, your determination. It begins deep in your heart, when you come to terms with the idea, the good news, that you are loved quite apart from your deserving, quite apart from anything you have done or failed to do, loved unconditionally.

God is love. That love is the most powerful reality in the world. It created you, and it can give you your life back. The brilliant motion picture director Lee Daniels has produced a movie, *Precious,* that is about the power of love, the destructive, tragic power when love is absent from human life, and the redemptive, saving, literally life-giving power of love when it is given—precious.

Claireece Precious Jones is an obese Harlem teenager, pregnant as a result of having been raped by her mother's boyfriend, who is her father. Her life has been filled with unrelenting sexual and physical abuse since childhood and, because of her appearance, rejection by almost everyone. Her world is dark and ugly and utterly without any beauty, kindness, courtesy—utterly loveless. For understandable reasons, she barely talks. Expelled from school because she is pregnant, a second time, she finds herself at a special school with an extraordinary teacher and a social worker who slowly, patiently, draw her out. The teacher has her students write about their lives in a journal. For obvious reasons, Precious can't bring herself to do it. The only

words she can write in her journal are “Why me?” The teacher persists: whatever it is, it’s important. Precious, who just that day had learned that she is HIV positive because of her mother’s boyfriend, is at the end of the line. Finally, she breaks down and weeps, and it is a confession of a young woman totally without self-regard, self-worth, without a self. “Nobody cares: nobody loves me, nobody has ever loved me.” The teacher, now kneeling at her desk—a little like Jesus, I thought, kneeling at the feet of his friends—says, “That is not true. Your baby loves you. I love you.” A miracle happens. Life, slowly, steadily, relentlessly returns. Love restores life. Love creates hope. Love changes the world.

Love withheld can break a heart, break your heart. Love freely, unconditionally given can save your life.

Jesus and his friends finished the meal, left the room, and walked to a garden where Jesus was betrayed. He was arrested, tried at nighttime, and the next day put to death.

“He died for our sins” it is commonly and frequently said. And it is true.

But this writer, John, says he also died for love. He died, quite simply, to show you how profoundly you are loved.

He is the Word made flesh.

He is the Word of God.

He is the word *love*.

He is these amazing words of God: “I love you. I want you to tell the world about me by your love. When you are together, I want you to be an institution, a church, that loves the world as I have loved you.”

“I want you to live in my love.”

“I want you to love your dearest ones, to love your neighbors, to love the world, to love one another, so the world will know.”

“Fear not,” he says. “I will love you to the end of the world.”

“Whatever happens to you, I will love you.”

“I will love you every day of your life, right up to the last day—and beyond. Forever.”

What wondrous love is this, O my soul, O my soul?
What wondrous love is this, O my soul?

Amen.